

Intelligence Quotient

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Memoirs of an Operative in the Middle East

By William Branigin

The year was 1957. The "Eisenhower Doctrine," aimed at preventing the spread of "international communism" in the Middle East, had just been proclaimed, and the CIA was building up

Lebanese liaison personnel coming and going nightly, that the Egyptian ambassador in Lebanon was reportedly taking bets on when and where the next U.S. coup would take place," writes Wilbur Crane Eveland.

His book, "Ropes of Sand," subtitled, "America's Failure in the Middle East," provides many such anecdotes as it delves into the development of U.S. policy toward the region and the activities of the Arab political leaders, U.S. diplomats and CIA operatives who influenced, or tried to, events in the Middle East.

Essentially a memoir, the book chronicles Eveland's experiences as a defense intelligence officer and military attache, adviser to the CIA, member of White House and Pentagon policy-planning staffs and private businessman in the Middle East, off and on, from 1949 to 1975. Most of the narrative concerns the '50s.

The failures Eveland describes stem largely from the "red scare" obsessions of the Eisenhower administration, notably those of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Much of the time, Eve-

Book World

ROPES OF SAND: America's Failure in the Middle East.

By Wilbur Crane Eveland.

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its Beirut station as a regional center for covert activities.

Now the target was Syria. CIA planners gathered in the Lebanese capital to plot the overthrow of Syria's government, which was perceived as drifting toward the Soviets. They were joined by the CIA's chief covert operator in the Middle East, Kermit (Kim) Roosevelt, who flew in from Washington and moved into the Beirut station chief's top-floor apartment, which became the plotters' conference site.

"So obvious were their 'covert' gyrations, with British, Iraqi, Jordanian and

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land writes, it was hard to figure out who was in charge of U.S. diplomacy in the area, the State Department or the CIA. Buoyed by its success in 1953 in helping to restore the shah of Iran to the throne, the CIA had a penchant for covert operations. The idea seemed to be that if some differences arose in U.S. relations with a Middle Eastern government, the way to deal with them was to organize that government's overthrow and replace that government with a friendlier one.

Among the CIA coup plots Eveland mentions are Operation Sipony to overthrow Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser and Operation Wappen to install a more amenable government in Syria. This diplomacy by coup d'etat failed to recognize that Arab nationalism and independence were not, of themselves, inimical to U.S. interests, Eveland says.

Although more than two decades have passed since many of the events the author describes, the CIA apparently is still sensitive about them. The agency delayed publication of the book earlier this year by demanding a prepublication review. They later declined to review the manuscript, and publication went ahead.

Throughout the book Eveland argues persuasively that the failures of American policy in the Middle East and the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict result largely from a U.S. tendency to identify its interests with Israel's. The author also forcefully criticizes what he portrays as expansionist Israeli designs dating almost from the birth of the Jewish state. He quotes, for example, a U.S. military attache in Israel in 1953 as saying that Israel's long-range objective was to seize control of the headwaters of the Jordan River to secure water sources for irrigation purposes. This objective, Eveland says, motivated Israeli raids against Syria from 1949 onward and the eventual conquest of the Golan Heights in 1967.

In his most intriguing account, Eveland describes an assignment as a sort of honorary spook under contract to the CIA in 1956, when he personally was involved in trying to bring off a coup in Syria. Unfortunately for the CIA, the takeover was planned for the same day that Israeli troops invaded Egypt and started driving toward the Suez Canal. Realizing that a coup timed to look like collusion with Israel could not succeed, its CIA-backed Syrian organizer called it off and was forced to flee the country.

The debacle pointed up another U.S. failure: that, as Eveland writes, the CIA's much-vaunted liaison with Israel's Mossad intelligence service was unreliable.

The account of the abortive Syria coup also underlines one of the flaws of this otherwise convincing book. In preceding chapters Eveland indicates that he disagreed with the premise that the Syrian government was going communist, and that he opposed covert action against it. Nevertheless, Eveland agreed to act as the CIA liaison with the Syrian plotters and take 500,000 Syrian pounds (about \$167,000) in coup money to Damascus in the trunk of his car. Eveland writes, "By now I realized that I was the 'bag man' in a totally unprofessional CIA operation."

A little late for that to come to him, perhaps. Other passages also may leave the reader wondering whether his criticisms and reservations about U.S. activities in the Middle East—complaints that he professes to have had at the time—did not benefit from hindsight.

Nevertheless, "Ropes of Sand" makes absorbing and lively reading. From the unique vantage point of his special assignments, Eveland is able to offer some of the best and richest detail yet to appear on American dealings with the Middle East during the period he describes.

The reviewer is a member of the foreign news staff of *The Washington Post*.